

Jean-François Berger, *The humanitarian diplomacy of the ICRC and the conflict in Croatia (1991-1992)*, International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva, 1995, 70 pages

There are some works which are noteworthy just as much for the questions they leave unanswered as for what they actually say about the events they set out to describe. Jean-François Berger's *The humanitarian diplomacy of the ICRC and the conflict in Croatia (1991-1992)* is one such book. In only 70 pages the author could do no more than paint a general picture of these two years of humanitarian diplomacy, and readers hoping to find more details will certainly have to seek them elsewhere. But Jean-François Berger, who was the head of the ICRC's Yugoslavia Task Force in 1991 and 1992 and was thus himself a player in the events he relates, obviously did not intend to write a definitive and comprehensive work on this chapter of modern history. He no doubt considered it useful, however, to give a first overview of these few months that were pivotal for the ICRC's work in this context. And indeed the book offers us some valuable insights.

History is made up of a succession of superimposed layers. The person who has to do the initial spadework has a thankless job. Too close to the events in question, with access to only some of the sources, he or she has the difficult task of outlining major developments, identifying the main problems and producing a sketch whose details will be filled in by the historians of the future. Those historians will owe a debt of gratitude to Jean-François Berger for clearing the ground.

This particular historical work, written so soon after the events, also serves an immediate purpose; it provides food for thought on the nature of humanitarian action in the last years of the twentieth century, on the role of the ICRC and in particular on humanitarian diplomacy, which is one of its instruments.

In recent years, and especially since 1989, humanitarian action has been entering a new era. It has moved into the forefront of international attention, one reason being that with the end of the Cold War certain

conflicts that had long been stifled have flared up into infernos. Another reason is that humanitarian action has become a complex and nebulous field, where governments using such action as a pretext rub shoulders with organizations of all kinds, whose standards of professionalism vary widely, and whose independence and impartiality are not above suspicion. What is more, all these players are operating in a context where sensational treatment of human tragedy and of appalling events has become part of the arsenal in the competition among the mass media.

It is in this setting that the ICRC has to conduct its ever-expanding activities, with due regard for its principles of action and its original and primary objective: to protect the victims. This is a difficult task, as in the context in which the ICRC operates there is always a risk of politicization and blunders, there is a constant temptation to distinguish between “good” and “bad” victims, and there is often a danger that humanitarian work will be manipulated for other purposes.

What Jean-François Berger demonstrates is that in this new and complicated environment it pays to adopt a professional, responsible and scrupulous approach. In describing the ICRC’s diplomacy and the mediation efforts it made, the author merely confirms what we already know about mediation: its success depends on the atmosphere, the mediator’s spirit of tolerance and ethical approach, the choice of venue and, of course, the importance of impartiality in choosing the right person for the mediator’s job. Those are but a few of the factors which the parties themselves mentioned as being behind the success of the ICRC’s efforts. Those same parties, asked to give their impressions of the ICRC’s role, both questioned the neutrality of the organization, which they perceived either as partial or as excessively neutral. This in itself shows how difficult it is to maintain neutrality in practice, and how vital it is to do so.

Jean-François Berger concludes his work by drawing some lessons and expressing some wishes. He would like humanitarian agencies to present a united front and to rely on existing rules of humanitarian law. Are these wishes likely to be fulfilled? Many observers have their doubts when they consider the free-for-all that humanitarian endeavour has become; but that in no way detracts from their being worthy objectives, and the ones we have to pursue.

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